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ABSTRACT

A multi-dimensional approach to evaluating psychological well-being or distress is essential for a full description of subjective mental health. Factor analytic techniques were used to explore dimensions of subjective mental health with data collected from two, nationwide representative sample surveys of U.S. adults. Indices were constructed concerning aspects of adjustment in marriage, parenthood, and work, self-perceptions, and symptoms of distress. Analyses revealed three dominant factors involving strain, feelings of low morale, and personal inadequacy. Distinct year effects also emerged: for women, a generational change in the relationship between self-perceptions and perceived problems in raising children; and for men, a shift toward greater compartmentalization of job concerns and the development of a distinct "help-seeking" orientation. (Author/KMF)

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Dimensions of Subjective Mental Health Across Two Generations: 1957-1976

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Abstract

Factor analytic techiques were used to explore dimensions of subjective mental health with data collected from two, nationwide representative-sample surveys of U.S. adults. Twenty indices were constructed concerning aspects of adjustment in marriage, parenthood, and work, self-perceptions, and symptoms of distress. Analyses revealed three dominant factors involving strain, feelings of low morale, and personal inadequacy. Distinct year effects also emerged: for women, a generational change in the relationship between self-perceptions and perceived problems in raising children; and for men, a shift toward greater compartmentalization of job concerns and the development of a distinct "help-seeking" orientation.

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Dimensions of Subjective Mental Health

Across Two Generations: 1957-1976

Mental health researchers have used a variety of diverse criteria to evaluate psychological well-being or distress. For example, self-evaluations (Rosenberg, 1965), life satisfaction (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976), and psychosomatic complaints (Myers, Lindenthal, & Pepper, 1974) have all been used as indicators of subjective psychological adjustment. Indeed, because the human personality is complex and multi-faceted, it seems most reasonable to examine many different measures for a complete appraisal of subjective adjustment (cf. Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960; Jahoda, 1958; Smith, 1961). Since diverse criteria complicate research investigations, however, rarely has any given study used more than one of these standards in assessing psychological disturbance.

The present study adopted the multiple-criterion approach. The results to be reported here support the idea that a multi-dimensional perspective is essential for a full description of subjective mental health and specifically indicate what these criteria might be. Factor analytic techniques were used to investigate communalities in response to many different measures of subjective adjustment. The emerging factor structures were then interpreted as suggesting basic psychological dimensions or cognitive orientations that may underlie people's self-descriptions of well-being.

The present study examined data from two, cross-sectional, nationwide surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan--one conducted in 1957, and the other in 1976. In the 1957 survey (reported in detail in Americans View Their Mental Health; Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960), a total of 2,460 adult respondents, 21 years of age or older, living in private households in the contiguous United States were selected by area sampling probability methods as a

representative cross-section of the 1957 adult population. In the 1976 survey, a comparable sample of 2,264 respondents was drawn (see Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, in press). In each of these surveys, respondents were interviewed about their experiences of distress, satisfaction, and adjustment in may different areas of their lives. The present analyses examined 20 diverse indices of subjective mental health, consisting of items included in both the 1957 and 1976 surveys.

A fundamental research question concerned how men and women employ these different measures of adjustment in their self-reports of psychological well-being. Our purposes were to identify basic psychological dimensions in self-evaluations and to gain an empirical basis for theorizing about sex differences in the structuring of subjective adjustment. Furthermore, by including comparable cross-sectional data from both 1957 and 1976, the present study offered a unique opportunity for an historical investigation of self-reported psychological adjustment.

METHOD

Subjects

In order to facilitate direct comparison of the present results with those of earlier factor analyses of the 1957 data (Veroff, Feld, & Gurin, 1962), the present analyses only included currently-married respondents with children. The sample was further restricted to employed married men with children and to non-working married women with children. The indices of job adjustment were thus only applicable for men.[1] For the 1957 data, these N's were 720 working husbands and 815 married housewives with children; for the 1976 data, 558 working husbands and 650 married housewives with children. The actual number of subjects included for specific correlations varied slightly due to incomplete data for some respondents.

Procedure

Psychological distress was measured under six topics: general feelings of distress, attitudes toward the self, marital adjustment, adjustment as a parent,

job adjustment, and psychophysical symptom complaints. Table 1 presents the 20 indices used to assess subjective adjustment, as well as the questions on which each of these indices was based. Responses to the items constituting each index were ranked for purposes of intercorrelation, with scores of 1 indicating lowest distress. Intercorrelation matrices of the indices (using Pearsonian product-moment r's) were then obtained separately for men and for women both for 1957 and for 1976. (Separate factor analyses for age, education, and income groups may also be necessary, and we anticipate following up these possibilities in future analyses.)

Factor Analyses

Each of the present analyses used an OSIRIS IV FACTAN program, involving an iterative, principal-axis factor analysis with varimax rotation. Separate factor analyses were performed using men and women for both the 1957 and the 1976 data. Besides the usual procedure of selecting only those factors with eigenvalues greater than unity (Kaiser, 1960), some of the present analyses also specified beforehand a maximum number of factors to be retained--either 3, 4, 5, or 6 factors. We examined and compared changes in factor structures across these different models, looking both for underlying psychological dimensions which were shared by subgroups, as well as for interpretable, unique (and perhaps more socio-culturally based) dimensions which emerged for different subgroups as more and more factors were extracted. These procedures allowed the present study to: 1) replicate earlier factor analyses of the 1957 data (Veroff et al., 1962), using more advanced analytic techniques, 2) differentiate dimensions of subjective adjustment which are common to everyone from those which are unique to a certain group, and 3) compare changes in the factor structures of men's and women's self-descriptions of adjustment from 1957 to 1976, as an empirical foundation for theorizing about shifts in the impact of sex roles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In attempting to interpret the factor structures for men and women, we only considered items which had factor loadings of .30 of higher ($p < .001$; Harman, 1967) and we will only discuss factors which were well-defined and interpretable. Overall, the resulting factors for men and women are remarkably similar--the same three, basic dimensions appear for both sexes in both years, regardless of the number of factors specified. However, intruiging sex differences and year effects also emerge in the factor loadings of the various items as increasing numbers of factors are retained.

Three Basic Dimensions of Subjective Adjustment

Our analyses revealed three, well-defined, dominant factors. The first of these, which we have called strain, is a cluster of psychosomatic symptoms including psychological anxiety, immobilization, physical ill health, feelings of nervous breakdown, and worrying. The second of these factors, defined by feelings of low morale, consists of general unhappiness, marital unhappiness, and low future morale. The third, consistent factor involves personal inadequacy, characterized by felt inadequacy as a spouse and as a parent and by the mention of shortcomings in the self.

The measures clustering on the first factor, strain, reflect either bodily or psychological reactions to stress or to problems facing the individual. Although these reactions may have emotional concomitants or consequences, they are not necessarily intertwined with particular affective states. This notion of the independence of strain and affect gains empirical support when we note that the second factor, which clearly is an affective evaluation of one's life, forms a distinctly separate cluster from that of the strain dimension. In addition, the measures loading on personal inadequacy, the third, more cognitive factor, also do not necessarily imply low morale. Even when one is aware and concerned about some

inadequacy in oneself there can still be a high general morale about one's life.

These same basic dimensions of adjustment were also found in earlier factor analyses of the 1957 data (Veroff et al., 1962). With only slight variations, these three factors were obtained for both men and women across both generations, regardless of the number of factors specified. This overall consistency in underlying factor structures suggests that strain, low morale, and feelings of inadequacy may be fundamental psychological aspects of distress which pertain to all people. Indeed, these three major parameters of self-evaluation of adjustment are strikingly parallel to those supposedly underlying attitudes in general--that is, cognitive (feelings of inadequacy), affective (low morale), and behavioral (strain) components (cf. Bem, 1970; Triandis, 1971).

Emergence of Distinctive Factors

Distinctive factors also emerged for different subgroups as more and more factors were extracted. Items which loaded only slightly or not at all in a three-factor model combined to form separate constellations of loadings when greater numbers of factors were retained. Although the nature of the items in these additional clusters generally varied depending on the exact number of factors specified in the analysis, several clear patterns of factor loadings did surface for men and for women across the different analyses.

For example, consider the 1976 analyses for married housewives with children. When only 3 or 4 factors were extracted, one of these--the basic "feelings of inadequacy" dimension--was characterized by high loadings both for felt role inadequacies (as a spouse and parent) and for perceived self-inadequacies (low self-acceptance and shortcomings in the self); however, when 5 or more factors were retained, feelings of role inadequacy and of self-inadequacy were drawn out into two separate factors. The distinctive factor structure involving the acknowledgement of negative traits in the self seems to represent a sort of "general psychological orientation" or heightened sense of self-awareness (Veroff et al., 1962)

which is similar, but not identical, to feelings of marital and parental inadequacy. Interestingly, this separation of self-awareness from feelings of role inadequacy was not found in the analyses for 1957 women.

While varying the number of specified factors produced distinctive changes in factor structures for men and women, a 6-factor model provided the clearest representation of previously identified structures. The extraction of six factors also brought several, distinct differences between the generations sharply into focus. Consequently, we have chosen the 6-factor model in order to illustrate some of the basic year-effects for men and for women. We now highlight two of these major generational differences--1) shifts in role-related aspects of adjustment which have occurred for both sexes; and, 2) the development of a pronounced "help-seeking" orientation in the factor structure for men.

Some Critical Generational Differences

Tables 2 and 3 present the varimax-rotated factor loadings in a 6-factor model for 1957 men and women and for 1976 men and women, respectively. Although men and women generally share the same three, basic factors, the relationship between role-relevant dimensions (such as work or parenting concerns) and other aspects of psychological adjustment shows definite generational changes. Specifically for 1957 men, items related to job adjustment--work problems, inadequacies, or dissatisfactions--loaded substantially on five of the six factors; but for 1976 men, job-related items only loaded appreciably on two factors. These results suggest that work concerns were a much more central dimension of adjustment in 1957 than in 1976. This represents an apparent shift toward greater compartmentalization of the work domain in men's self-evaluations. One exciting implication of this analysis is that job issues may have become less identity-relevant for men.

For women, striking generational differences occur in the relationship between self-perception and perceived parental problems. Among non-working married mothers, the analyses for both 1957 and 1976 revealed a distinct factor defined by

seeing oneself as different from others and mentioning problems in raising one's children. In the 1957 data, this dimension of adjustment showed high negative loadings for both items; in other words, women who reported parental difficulties perceived themselves as being "just like most people" (see Table 2, Factor 6). But in 1976, these two items loaded together in a bipolar fashion (i.e., one with a positive and the other with a negative loading), so that women who reported parental problems instead perceived themselves as being different from others (see Table 3, Factor 6).

One interpretation of these results is that because of the broader range of roles and lifestyles now available to women, those who mentioned having problems in raising children felt more unique in 1976 than did their counterparts in 1957. In 1957, the housewife with child problems may have seen fewer options and may have felt more similar to others; but in 1976, she may have perceived a variety of alternative lifestyles which served to differentiate her own from those of other women.

Another distinct dimension of adjustment emerged for men in 1976, involving the mention of problems with work, children, and marriage, and feelings of nervous breakdown (see Table 3, Factor 4). Characterized by the structuring of life situations in problematic terms, this factor seems to denote a type of "help-seeking" orientation which is apparently increasing among men. The basis of this generational shift may lie in the recent, remarkable rise in seeking out formal and informal help-sources among Americans. Help-seeking has been a part of women's traditional roles. This orientation has been added to men's psychological repertoire only recently, as our culture generally has become interested in help-seeking for psychological problems. We speculate that a cognitive style of construing "problems" in help-seeking terms might not yet be integrated into other aspects of men's subjective adjustment. Rather, it appears that this orientation is a distinct, separate dimension of male well-being at this point in

our cultural history.

In summary, the present study has identified three basic dimensions which underlie self-evaluated adjustment both for men and for women across both generations: strain (a cluster of psychophysical symptoms), feelings of low morale (general, marital, and future unhappiness), and personal inadequacy (in role relations and in the self). These similarities in factor structure suggest fundamental psychological dimensions which may be universally applicable. However, distinct generational differences were also found, involving changes in specific role-related aspects of adjustment--for men, an increased compartmentalization of work-related concerns; and for women, a shift toward self-perceptions of uniqueness in experiencing problems in raising children. Finally, a growing trend was noted among men toward the structuring of self-reported adjustment in problematic terms. This distinctive factor was interpreted as reflecting a general "help-seeking" orientation not yet integrated into men's evaluations of their well-being.

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Footnote

[1]Because of the scarcity of working female respondents in the 1957 sample, separate factor analyses were not performed on the 1957 data for employed mothers. Although increases in the number of working women allowed a separate analysis for 1976 employed women, these data have not been included in the present paper.

TABLE 1

Indices Used In Factor Analyses Of Subjective Psychological Adjustment

Questions	Indices
Taking things all together, how would you say things are these days--would you say you're very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy these days?	Unhappiness Very happy Pretty happy Not too happy
Compared to your life today, how do you think things will be five or ten years from now--do you think things will be happier for you then they are now, not quite as happy, or what?	Low future morale Very happy Happy Not too happy
Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage--would you say your marriage was very happy, a little happier than average, just about average, or not too happy?	Marital Unhappiness Very happy A little happier than average Average happiness Not too happy
Even in cases where married people are happy there have often been times in the past when they weren't too happy--when they had problems getting along with each other. Has this been true for you?	Marriage Problems Never had problems Mentions problems
Many men (women) feel that they're not as good husbands (wives) as they would like to be. Have you ever felt this way? What kind of things make you feel this way? Do you feel this way a lot of times, or only once in a while?	Inadequacy as a spouse Never Once in a while A lot of times
First, thinking about a man's (woman's) life, how is a man's (woman's) life changed by having children?	Negative view of kids: Coder rating of change perceived as accompanying children Positive Neutral Negative
Most people have had some problems in raising their children. What are the main problems you've had in raising your children?	Problems with children Never had problems Mentions problems

TABLE 1 - Continued

Questions	Indices
Many men (women) feel that they're not as good fathers (mothers) as they would like to be. Have you ever felt this way? (If yes) What kinds of things have made you feel this way? Have you felt this way a lot of times, or only once in a while?	Inadequacy as a parent Never Once in a while A lot of times
Everybody has some things he worries about more or less. What kinds of things do you worry about most? Do you worry about such things a lot, or not very much?	Worrying Never Not much Sometimes A lot of times Always
Have you ever felt that you were going to have a nervous breakdown?	Nervous breakdown No Yes
Do you ever have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep? Check one: Nearly all the time; pretty often; not very much; never.	Symptom Factor 1: Psychological Anxiety[a]
Have you ever been bothered by nervousness, feeling fidgety and tense? Check one: as above.	
Do you feel you are bothered by all sorts of pains and ailments in parts of your body? Yes; no.	Symptom Factor 2: Immobilization[a]
For the most part, do you feel healthy enough to carry out the things you would like to do? Yes; no.	Symptom Factor 3; Physical Ill Health[a]
Do you find it difficult to get up in the morning? Check one: Nearly all the time; pretty often; not very much; never.	
Are you troubled by your hands sweating so that you feel damp and clammy? Check one: Many times; sometimes; hardly ever; never.	
People are the same in many ways, but no two people are exactly alike. What are some of the ways in which you're different from most other people?	No uniqueness in self Mentions differences Doesn't know Sees no differences from others

TABLE 1 - Continued

Questions	Indices
Same as above	Low self-acceptance (degree to which subject gives negative evaluation of the self in describing differences from others) Very positive Positive Neutral Ambivalent Negative
Many people, when they think about their children, would like them to be different from themselves in some ways. If you had a son (daughter) how would you like him (her) to be different from you?	Shortcomings Does not want child to be different Wants child to be different
How about your good points? What would you say are your strongest points?	Lack of strongpoints Mentions strongpoints Sees no strongpoints
Taking into consideration all the things about your job, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with it?	Job dissatisfactions Very satisfied Satisfied Neutral Ambivalent Dissatisfied
Have you ever had any problems with your work--times when you couldn't work or weren't getting along on the job, or didn't know what kind of work you wanted to do?	Work problems Never had problems Mentions problems
How good would you say you are at doing this kind of work--would you say you were very good, a little better than average, just average, or not very good?	Job inadequacy Very good Little better than average Average Not very good

[a]These symptom factor indices are based on prior factor analyses of a symptom list of 20 items which was modified from the Health Opinion Survey (MacMillan, 1957). Each index represents the two items most clearly typifying the factor. The items presented are ones having not only high loadings on the factors they are assumed to represent, but also minimal loadings on other factors.

Table 2. VARIMAX-ROTATED FACTOR LOADINGS IN 6-FACTOR MODEL FOR 1957 MEN AND WOMEN[a]

Indices of Subjective Adustment	COMMON FACTORS						UNIQUE FACTORS					
	STRAIN		LOW MORALE		PERSONAL INADEQUACY		MEN			WOMEN		
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
Unhappiness	-.15	-.15	.83	-.84	.08	.00	.08	-.04	-.04	-.08	-.04	.05
Low future morale	-.13	-.11	.79	-.75	.16	-.08	-.10	-.02	-.02	.09	.08	-.05
Marital unhappiness	.09	-.08	.67	-.71	.18	-.06	.14	-.03	.17	-.26	-.03	.04
Marriage problems	-.07	-.20	.18	-.16	.34	-.29	.40	-.28	.04	-.59	-.06	.09
Inadequacy as a spouse	-.27	-.18	.06	.05	.60	-.67	.06	-.15	-.08	-.06	-.09	.08
Negative view of kids	.13	.04	-.01	-.18	-.03	-.13	.12	-.80	.20	-.51	.05	-.02
Problems with children	.16	-.02	-.16	.04	.49	-.01	-.34	.16	.11	-.04	.03	-.87
Inadequacy as a parent	-.18	-.11	.10	-.06	.64	-.70	.02	.18	.08	-.07	.05	-.14
Worrying	-.27	-.37	.16	-.17	.16	-.14	.14	-.01	.27	.43	-.03	.06
Nervous breakdown	-.63	-.68	.09	-.05	.05	-.07	.02	.15	.05	-.02	.05	.14
Psychological anxiety	-.75	-.76	.07	-.19	.18	-.12	.16	-.02	.02	.00	-.03	-.08
Immobilization	-.56	-.55	-.18	.17	.13	-.28	.25	-.25	-.05	-.07	.00	-.15
Physical ill health	-.74	-.74	.13	-.23	.09	.05	-.11	.10	-.02	.05	.00	.01
No uniqueness	.04	.15	.07	-.10	-.07	-.07	-.07	-.01	.63	.21	-.68	-.33
Low self-acceptance	-.03	.01	.04	-.16	.29	-.52	.06	-.00	-.29	.43	.08	-.23
Shortcomings	.07	-.03	.13	.08	.44	-.53	.36	.03	-.26	-.15	.14	-.03
Lack of strongpoints	-.12	-.08	.09	.10	.18	.08	.07	-.10	-.56	-.14	-.77	.26
Job dissatisfaction	-.13		.04		-.01		.69	-.04	-.09			
Work problems	-.30		-.09		.50		.06	-.10	.03			
Job inadequacy	.02		-.19		.08		.54	.54	.36			
% TOTAL VARIANCE	11.1	12.8	10.0	12.0	9.2	10.2	6.8	6.0	5.8	6.9	6.6	6.4
% COMMON VARIANCE	22.7	23.3	20.3	21.9	18.8	18.6	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.6	12.0	11.6

[a]The actual order of extraction for these factors was 5,2,1,3,6,4 for men; and 1,2,3,5,4,6 for women.

Table 3. VARIMAX-ROTATED FACTOR LOADINGS IN 6-FACTOR MODEL FOR 1976 MEN AND WOMEN[a]

Indices of Subjective Adjustment	COMMON FACTORS						UNIQUE FACTORS					
	STRAIN		LOW MORALE		PERSONAL INADEQUACY		MEN			WOMEN		
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
Unhappiness	-.31	.10	-.69	.83	-.06	-.03	.05	.13	.20	-.01	-.07	-.07
Low future morale	-.06	.07	-.67	.73	.05	-.03	-.07	.36	-.07	-.22	.03	-.15
Marital unhappiness	.02	.10	-.71	.70	-.08	.05	.05	-.24	.09	.18	-.04	.19
Marriage problems	.00	.03	-.29	.20	-.36	.40	.50	-.10	-.20	-.29	-.02	.40
Inadequacy as a spouse	-.18	.14	-.12	-.01	-.74	-.76	.01	-.01	-.09	.04	.11	.01
Negative view of kids	.14	-.01	-.13	-.20	.09	.02	.50	-.31	.06	.29	-.46	.07
Problems with children	-.02	-.03	.04	.02	.05	-.01	.63	.12	.13	.04	.16	.77
Inadequacy as a parent	-.05	.00	.05	.02	-.81	-.81	.09	.13	.06	.06	.04	.05
Worrying	-.48	.24	-.09	.09	-.27	-.42	-.08	-.20	.02	-.04	-.29	-.05
Nervous breakdown	-.56	.54	-.05	.01	-.03	-.24	.40	.15	-.06	-.06	.04	.20
Psychological anxiety	-.80	.78	-.13	.16	-.06	-.04	-.03	-.08	.03	.16	-.06	.04
Immobilization	-.44	.53	-.07	.02	-.04	-.22	.08	-.39	.14	.13	-.33	.11
Physical ill health	-.65	.76	.02	.11	-.01	.06	-.07	.06	.13	-.07	.19	-.16
No uniqueness	.05	-.13	-.03	.11	.04	-.00	.14	.63	.16	.16	.19	-.44
Low self-acceptance	-.07	.13	.03	.07	-.01	-.01	.05	.13	.52	.67	.24	-.20
Shortcomings	.02	-.01	.06	-.16	-.47	-.11	-.09	-.24	.45	.67	-.21	.09
Lack of strongpoints	.03	.04	-.06	.05	-.06	-.07	-.14	.54	-.01	.12	.75	.06
Job dissatisfaction	-.18		-.02		-.04		.12	.01	.46			
Work problems	-.24		.12		-.19		.49	-.07	.09			
Job inadequacy	.08		-.27		.11		.02	-.05	.60			
% TOTAL VARIANCE	10.3	11.1	8.4	11.1	8.5	10.0	7.0	6.7	6.3	7.4	7.0	6.8
% COMMON VARIANCE	21.8	20.8	17.8	20.7	18.0	18.8	14.9	14.3	13.3	13.8	13.2	12.8

[a]The actual order of extraction for these factors was 1,2,3,5,4,6 for men; and 3,2,1,5,4,6 for women.